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SUNSHINE STATES

Wild Times and Extraordinary Lives in the Land of Gators, Guns and Grapefruits

TD

By Patrick Carr

Doubleday. 237 pp. $19.95

On assignment at Cypress Gardens, the first of Florida's "theme parks," Patrick Carr encountered a performer in the park's water-skiing show named Michelle Morris, "like myself an English person converted to the American Way." He writes, "I know just exactly what she means when she says that for her, Cypress Gardens and her new life in Florida are gifts she never knew existed until she was given them: a real playground, real playmates, real fun." He continues:

"Florida, you see, is for me both a natural-world sensorium and a brash bold built-yesterday extremity of a brash bold built-yesterday nation, a place which actually encourages a person to start again in freedom from old glooms-and I am hardly alone in that feeling. The unnourishing roots shared by Michelle and I, the ones tapping into middle-class England's cold gray reservoir of convention and propriety and inhibition, are just one variety among many; other people from other places have other useless roots to cut in the Sunshine State. They have other baggage to shed, and shed it they do."

Which is why Carr, a freelance writer born in Britain and resident for a time in New York, has put down roots in Tampa. He loves his adopted state and he loves it well-well enough to see it, as this book demonstrates, with clarity and without sentimentality, to understand what's wrong with it as well as what's right about it. "Sunshine States" is a collection of seven pieces-count them for yourself; no table of contents is provided-that are united by an unhysterical concern for Florida's environment both natural and human, and that manage to be both entertaining and sensible.

Carr's subjects are nothing if not varied; among them are the chairman of the Seminole Council, an alligator hunt, the mad rush of development around Tampa Bay, the Special Response Team doing war against drugs in Miami, and the aforementioned Aquamaids of Cypress Gardens. Carr is a jaunty writer with a slight tendency to be self-consciously so, but he's also a thorough reporter, a careful listener and a perceptive

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observer; "Sunshine States" can't claim to be the last word on Florida, but the words it does get in are pithy and pertinent.

Florida, as Carr sees it, is on "the frontier of nature" and "the frontier of American social interaction, the brave new world in action-cultures colliding, urban growth and rural decay seesawing wildly in a boom/bust economy, pollution tightening its stranglehold, education in ruins, racism rampant, corruption endemic, fortunes falling out of the sky, drugs everywhere, thievery and violence prospects you can plan on; the melting pot on high heat."

It is, as one of the people he interviews remarks, a place where everything is new and where as a result there is no tradition of public service or communal restraint. It is, as the long, careful piece on Tampa emphasizes, a place where politics is corrupt not merely in the ordinary sense of favors bought and sold but a deeper, more troubling one: an inability to think in terms of the greater public good-a fixation on the profits of the day and an unwillingness to consider the costs that they will exact tomorrow.

Carr is no environmental extremist; among those people whom he clearly admires are Roger Stewart, the nonsense-free director of Tampa's Environmental Protection Commission who understands that compromises between humans and nature must be struck, and Lovett Williams, a former game warden who now presides over a hunting and fishing camp "trying to achieve increased economic productivity without the burden of increased population." But though Carr understands that Florida has to learn how to live with its immense human burden, he laments its so-recently departed past:

"You can't spend time with any people who grew up in the state without at some point hearing about personal magic places-a hidden mangrove inlet in which they learned the secrets of the wily snook; a cool deep swimming hole hidden by stands of riverbank hardwoods; a field full of droves or a wood full of childhood adventure-where now those same people buy gas or rent movies or sit in traffic jams watching the malls and condos and Jiffy Lubes grow."

Carr obviously wishes he could have known Florida as it was before the war, and just as obviously senses that it was a better place; during the five years I lived in the state, I felt the same way. But he's a realist who knows that you can't unpave the highways or knock down the condos; in "Sunshine States" he has written, therefore, a book that is as reasonable as it is winning.

RE namz : North America | usa : United States | usfl : Florida | uss : Southern U.S.

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